Time Was at Union Station

Memories of Restraining Ropes, Crowds And Trains Leaving in Four Sections

As the Boston & Albany Railroad is the first to point out, barely enough people come to Springfield's cavernous Union Station these days to absorb the echo.

Remembering When

Yet a veteran railroad man like Train Announcer Michael F. McCarthy can recall when:

It took ropes, gatemen and teams of railroad police to hold back the crowds from the track exits.

Trains No. 58 and 59—Boston to New York — used to leave Springfield in four sections, sometimes with a dozen cars each.

B&A General Manager James Truden used to stay near a phone every night until 58 and 59, his "pet trains," had completed their runs.

The chef on Henry Ford's private Pullman, the "Shady Lane," used to wire ahead from Worcester for such items as layers of cake so he could start making strawberry shortcake for dessert by the time they reached Union Station.

In the words of McCarthy, train announcer in Union Station for 30 years: "Everybody used to ride the railroads. It was the only way to travel."

Heyday of Railroads

The heyday of the rail passenger business in this area, said McCarthy, was the 1930s, depression and all—and Trains 58 and 59 were the symbols of railroading at its finest.

At 4 p. m., No. 58 left from New York and No. 59 left from Boston. No. 59 often left Springfield for New York in four sections—one from Boston, one from White River Junction and two made up at Union Station.

When No. 58 arrived at Union Station from New York, often in four sections, there would be a changeover of crews and engines. Perhaps two sections would unload here, while others left for Boston and White River Junction. The New York-Boston run took about five hours and 15 minutes.

"Man, that was real railroading," said McCarthy. "Up in Boston, Jim Truden, the general manager, would be right by the telephone, in his office or at home, until he had made sure 58 and 59 had reached their destinations. He wouldn't go to bed until they had.

Pet Trains

"Those trains were his pets. They'd have two diners, three or four parlor cars. The accommodations couldn't be beat. He even helped pick out the crews."

In those days, said McCarthy, you understood why Union Station's main lobby had been built with such vast proportions. He pointed out the bench rings, long since unused, to which ropes were tied to restrain the crowds on holidays.

"It was the only way we could keep the exits clear, so people unloading from trains could get through," he said. "We had to call in extra men—gatemen to man the ropes and railroad police officers to help hold back the crowds."

At Union Station McCarthy met many of the leading Americans of the day.

"I remember one day the station was packed, when I saw Leverett Salstonstall walking in," he said. "I beckoned him over and led him through the crowd and up the stairs so he could get into his Pullman accommodations ahead of time.

Passing the Word

"This really worried him. 'Mac,' he said, 'this isn't fair to all those people who have been waiting there ahead of me.'

"I told him not to worry. 'I'll just have to tell two or three people in the front row who you are and it will spread all through the crowd. They'll be tickled to death.' And they were."

Henry Ford used to come through Springfield from Detroit on the "Wolverine," a major east-west train. Ford had his own Pullman, the "Shady Lane," McCarthy recalls.

"I'm not sure, but it may have been built to order," he said. "It had a drawing room, dining room, sleeping quarters and a rounded rear observation window.

Request for Cake

"Several times we received wires from Worcester asking us to pick up some food to stock the 'Shady Lane' when she came through Springfield. I remember very well the time the chef asked for layers of cake so he could make strawberry shortcake—he apparently had his own recipe for that. He just wanted the layers of cake. Somebody went down to one of the bakeries and got it for him."

All of which happened in the days when railroading was in flower—and Union Station wasn't empty, echoing and known as the Boston & Albany's "white elephant."

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